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Something needs to be said – Some thoughts on the possibilities and limitations of ‘voice’

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ABSTRACT

This paper is an introduction to the (virtual) special issue “Students’ voice in inclusive education” in which several international studies are collected to present research on students’ thoughts, needs, ideas and perspectives on inclusion in education. In addition to the papers of the special issue, the current paper will provide the reasoning and a theoretical background for the special issue. The impetus of the special issue will be closed with a critical reflection and recommendation for researchers and practitioners in the field of inclusive education.

1. Introduction

Following on from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the right to freedom of opinion and expression (Assembly, 1948), the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC; United Nations, 1989) asserted that every child and student has the right to express their opinions freely in matters affecting them. This framework of rights has emerged alongside an increasing recognition of (young) students as competent individuals, ‘playing an active part in a search for meanings’ (Clark, 2017, p.23) and together this has elevated the importance of engaging with students unique perspectives and views on their own situations and experiences (Sandberg, 2017). Notwithstanding, in developing our institutional views of learners and their identity, it is important to recognise the melange of narratives (Eriksen, 2018). Being learners involves us, as learners, in elaborating different possibilities in different situations and relationships with others, whilst evolving membership within a community (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Autonomy is achieved by building relationships with others (Boreham & Morgan, 2004) with dialogue as a foundational process for learning (Freire & Macedo, 1999; Mercer & Littleton, 2007). As educators and researchers, we need to be alert as to how specific voices emerge, are heard and are valued (Maybin, 2012). As Rinaldi (2006) suggested in an early years context, a ‘pedagogy of listening’ should be the foundation of practice, at the core of the learning relationship between practitioner and child.

2. Frameworks and models for students’ voice and participation

It does not come as a surprise that since the ratification of the CRC (United Nations, 1989) and the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994) many frameworks and models have been designed in which argumentations for and against students’ voice are listed and

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conceptualisations of students' voice and participation are provided. These frameworks and models provide researchers and practitioners an informed theoretical understanding of students' voices. Lundy (2007) identified in Act. 12 of the CRC (United Nations, 1989) four distinctive aspects of voice; space, voice, audience and influence. These four aspects indicate that 'voice' is more than simply 'listening' to students. When the voiced perspectives of (young) students are used to realize change, students are empowered and valued as experts on their own lived experiences (Thomson, 2011). This approach to 'voice' requires that students are to be acknowledged and respected as involved and active participants (Lundy, 2007).

Frameworks and models which are focussed on student participation have different definitions of what student participation is and apprehend diverse levels of participation; these levels can range from in cooperating students voices until activities completely led by students (Bron & Veugelers, 2014). A well known model of participation with children (and students) is the so-called 'ladder of children's participation' (Hart, 1992). Hart later reflects upon this model and that this ladder would impose a hierarchy in levels of participation (Hart, 2008). For example, a study in which students were interviewed would be measured as a lower level of participation when applying the ladder as an evaluation tool for student participation. Another model of determining student participation, designed specifically for participatory work in educational settings, is the four level model of student participation by Fielding (2001). This model determines the level of engagement of participation based on the roles students had in a study: as source of data, active respondents, co-researcher and/or students as researchers. Fielding's model classifies student voice research from (superficial) inclusion to collaboration in which students are significantly engaged (Eckhoff, 2019). The presented frameworks and models (and others which are not covered in this paper) provide starting points for researchers who are interested in students voices, without the labeling if the level of student voice is good or bad.

3. Students' voice in practice

With the movement in recognition now given to 'voice', listening to students has the potential to shift from being occasional and tokenistic, to being embedded in and fundamental to everyday practice (Bath, 2013; Clark, 2017; Merewether & Fleet, 2014). In acknowledging students as contributors in the social construction of knowledge, and by using their experiences as relevant resources, teachers could be building on their ideas and perspectives (Silseth, 2018). Yet, although teachers seem ready to listen, they are constrained by systemic structures that do not allow learners to work alongside them, leading to a general sense of frustration amongst both teachers and pupils (Jones & Bubb, 2020). This issue also reflects the long-term lack of available approaches for practitioners to develop skills in responding to the students perspective and agency (Bachman & Haug, 2006; Dalhaug & Nes, 2010).

Even though the need for student voices to be heard is a central policy aim in many countries (and the research literature), in practice it is conspicuous by its absence. Ideally students' voice practices means that students are included as active partners to make a change and students are involved in decisions that concern their daily life (Lundy, 2007; Thomson, 2011). If students' voice practice was shaped and acted upon as an ideal practice, all aspects of students' rights, as described in Article 12 of the UNCRPD, 2006, would be adhered to (Lundy, 2007).

This gap between rhetoric and practice is evident globally. In Australia, for example, where issues of voice have received much attention, it has primarily focussed upon consultation, exerting limited influence on classroom relations and side-lining young people who are more challenging to engage (Charteris & Smardon, 2019b; Charteris & Smardon, 2019a; whilst in Sweden, schools within research projects have shown no substantial levels of participation nor evidence of pupil power (Keisu & Ahlström, 2020); in a longitudinal study in Scotland, the process of voice could be seen as becoming further constrained since the turn of the century when a thriving pupil council within a school had become inactive ten years later (Rix & Parry, 2014); and in Ireland, students have been observed to be keen to be heard, but their understanding of participation was very different to their teachers', which led the researchers to conclude that there needed to be changes to policy, practice and culture (Forde, Horgan, Martin, & Parkes, 2018).

The reasons for this absence in practice and its omission within policy and research recommendations are not clear. Practitioners and researchers may be wary of finding out what (young) students think and experience because of the consequences of then responding to such insights (Hudson, 2012; Sandberg, 2017). They may fear that the 'parameters of discipline and behavioural control' (Hudson, 2012, p.3) may be subsequently breached. They may find themselves caught between shifting policy directive and priorities (Parry, Rix, Sheehy, & Simmons, 2013). More fundamentally they may disregard the value of some students' perspectives on the basis of their maturity or capability (Bae, 2010; Stafford, 2017; Hudson, 2012).

Whatever the causes, the challenge is apparent across educational contexts; but there are also specific absences of voice, such as in relation to bullying (Clark, 2017) child welfare (Husby, Slettebø, & Juul, 2018) and working with Indigenous pupils, particularly those with intellectual impairments (Gjertsen, 2019). In Canada, for example, Indigenous students consider themselves as having very limited opportunities to enact change (Cherubini, 2018); and Indigenous students in Australia report an inability for their voice to be heard in education (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2019). Any intention to listen to students and seek their perspectives also reveals complexities and tensions for very young students or those who are viewed as non-verbal. A 'listening to students' paradigm within research and practice can often privilege young people who communicate conventionally, in ways that readily engage the listener (Warming, 2011). Studies have shown that students indicated as disabled (of all ages) are often less likely to be listened to and have their views taken into account (Franklin & Sloper, 2009; Gray & Winter, 2011). To engage with the views of all students, however young and however they express themselves, requires attention to their diverse and intricate efforts to communicate (Pascall & Bartram, 2009; Brooker, 2011; Payler, Geogeson, & Wong, 2016); a commitment from the practitioners to take more time with interactions; and, to have a willingness to be flexible and innovative (Georgeson, Porter, Daniels, & Feiler, 2014; Schwartz, Detlefsen, & Clark, 2015).

These oversights and challenges are particularly significant in the context of inclusion and the education for all agenda. It is

suggested that inclusive education is successful when all students, with or without special educational needs, have an active participation in day to day school-life and are seen as valued members of the educational community (Bottrell & Goodwin, 2011). On a practical level, it is possible to show the benefits of such an approach. It can, for example, improve civic engagement (Baroutsis, McGregor, & Mills, 2016). It could also encourage student engagement in moments of learning, where subjects are no longer as a separate world. So that these structured learning opportunities become hybrid spaces where teachers see the value of the learner's voice and enable them to apply their knowledge to their daily living (Barton & Tan, 2009). However, it is far harder to show the impact of not including the voice of the student.

There are entire fields of research and practice which can be seen to be lacking an engagement with students' voice, fields which many would place at the heart of a drive toward inclusive practice, and where the absence seems non-sensical. For example, the lack of voices of students with Autism in informing support, interventions and education (Parsons et al., 2009) and the consequent call to develop measures (such as social networks or personally identified targets) that have relevance in their everyday lives and that can easily be gathered in authentic environments (Kasari & Smith, 2013). Given the weight of evidence which supports the value of relevance and meaningfulness to the learner as both motivators and facilitators of school learning, instituting programmes which seek to teach particular behaviours without reference to their relevance and meaningfulness to the intended learner, does seem counter-intuitive. But the same can be said for the whole of the curriculum for all learners. The traditional curriculum can be seen to be poorly aligned with learner motivations (Morales-Doyle, 2018) or require a lot of work to convey its relevance (Binns & Kinder, 2019). If educators perceive a topic as relevant, this relevance can also take various forms; for example, across settings and cohorts, learners may have a focus upon a subject's practical or political relevance or its associations with a process or profession (Sealey & Noyes, 2010); and this sense of relevance is likely to vary over their lifespan and according to their circumstances.

Of course, a general or specific lack of voice is not just a matter of missing practical opportunities; it also goes against those rights mentioned at the start of this article. It represents an understanding of students which generally places them in one of two moral camps; either as vulnerable, or as moral agents, and fails to build on an understanding of them as both active moral agents and developing beings (Montreuil, Noronha, Floriani, & Carnevale, 2018). These views are also reflected in the way in which students are positioned within research, which presents different ethical questions and presumptions around agency. As O'Neill (2018)

points out, research on (young) students may have no direct benefit for them or may be presented as minimal-risk but morally necessary to involve them in; it may be premised on a belief that no reasonable person would object to their participation or that students will individually or collectively benefit in some moral or socially valued manner. These positions all over-ride the (young) student as a moral agent even as they variously downplay or highlight their vulnerability.

3.1. Students' voices in inclusive education; the special issue

At the heart of our responses, as educators, academics and administrators, to the issue and experience of engaging with voice are notions of power. These tend to reflect a traditional, hierarchically-situated asymmetry. Institutionalised conceptions of and responses to age, gender, ethnicity, class, sexuality and ability inform the power relations between teacher and learners, so that the voices of students can be downplayed as not relevant or dismissed as disruptive, not as a voice of knowing (Hohti & Karlsson, 2014). It is against this background that the virtual special edition of students voices in inclusive education is situated.¹ It is premised upon a belief that research (and teaching) can rebalance these absences, gaps and asymmetries by having researchers working alongside learners or by allowing them to lead. In putting together the special issue on students' voices in inclusive education we called for (international) researchers to present studies which address ways to identify student voices whilst acknowledging and maintaining the student's integrity and identity within the context of an educational setting. It asked for papers that not only address the methodologies of research regarding student voices (on various levels of student participation), which combine theory, policy and practice within a research-based approach, but also those that explore how students' voices can and are transferred to practice; providing insights into how practitioners hear and respond to students' voices in (inclusive) education settings.

The studies currently² published in the virtual special issue portray a diverse range of students in inclusive education; from students in primary schools (Andriana & Evans, *this issue*) to school-aged mothers (Howell & Lynch, *this issue*). The used methodologies of research regarding student voices, that combine theory, policy and practice within a research-based approach, reflect various levels of student voice research ranging from questionnaire studies (Spörer et al., *this issue*) through to various versions of interviews (Avramidis & Aroni, *this issue*; Howell & Lynch, *this issue*) and presenting participatory approaches of students' voices (Andriana & Evans, *this issue*). The researchers of the included papers acknowledge the importance of students' voice on diverse topics related to inclusive education. Yet, elaborating or exploring how the perspectives of students should be used to realize change remains evasive. An example with an explanation is presented in the paper by Andriana and Evans (*this issue*). In their study teachers expressed that they are open for change, but that the issue for not changing various inclusive education labels and wording was related to national policies, not the teacher's intentions.

¹ Manuscripts which are part of a Virtual Special Issues (VSI) in the International Journal of Educational Research are published as Article Based Publication and grouped as a VSI. References made in this article to publications which are part of the VSI are recognizable by the in-text indication [*this issue*]. Each article, as part of the VSI, is recognized by the line under the articles abstract: "This article is part of a Special Issue entitled Listen to Student Voices."

² September 2020. Due to the digital features of the special issue new contributions can be added in the future.

4. A critical reflection and conclusion

The impetus of the following reflections are based on the content and process of compiling this special issue. But first, we feel it is needed to express that as Guest Editors we are very thankful to all the authors who submitted a manuscript. Not to mention our gratitude to the reviewers who raised critical questions on the aspects of students' voices in inclusive education, during these unprecedented times of global crises: large bush fires, strikes in academia to hold the line and COVID-19. Yet a critical reflection and conclusion as to where student voice research in inclusive education is currently situated, is not insurmountable.

In the current paper we have referred to a multitude of publications reporting theories, models and studies of what students' voice is, why listening and acting upon students' perspectives is important and how it is a right of students to be involved in the realization of inclusive education. This body of literature together with the papers published within the special issue, shows that over the past decades the attention for students' voice and participation has grown (e.g. Czerniawski & Kidd, 2011; Pearson, 2016; UNESCO, 2020). Yet, we conclude that the journey towards students' voice research hasn't progressed far from the first steps by which it was argued if and for listening to students' voices. Therefore we ask researchers and practitioners to critically look at how they act upon student voice in inclusive education. We urge researchers to take the next step in student voice practice and make students active partners in the change and realization of inclusive education for all. Based on the four aspects of student participation in relation to Article 12, as identified by Lundy (2007), we present the following questions to guide and provoke researchers reflections for future research in the field of students' voice:

Space: Who needs to be given the opportunity to express their perceptions on (the multiple aspects of) inclusive education?

Voice: How do we facilitate students to express their views? Can we offer a multitude of ways for people to express their perspectives, such as art, music and performance (Thomson, 2011)?

Audience: Who should listen to the voices of students? How can we widen the audiences for student views? How can we do this without breaking their trust or putting students at harm?

Influence: How can our research enable the expression of voices so that they are acted upon appropriately, to make a difference and facilitate change?

We are convinced that it is possible to move forward. Our goal is that future studies of students' voice will show progression toward an equitable, valuable, inclusive and relevant education for all students, with such change made as a result of hearing students' voices and using those voices as a catalyst for change. We, therefore, invite researchers to keep filling the space provided in this special issue by writing and submitting new manuscripts that are focussed on how students' voices are used to create change in inclusive education. We welcome and look forward to your contributions.

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